

The most important resolution you'll ever make



At the beginning of this year, many of us promised ourselves we would make improvements in our lives for 2020.

It is no surprise that most are struggling to keep those New Year's resolutions and will break and remake them many times hoping to get one to stick. According to the research group Ipsos, the top vows that Americans made this year were to get their finances in order, eat healthier and exercise more—all worthy pursuits. But studies of the happiest people on earth show that rich or poor, thin or not, there is something that matters more to our overall happiness.

If you could make a single resolution during 2020—and because of it, be happier from now on—would you make it? Turns out you can.

I was able to get motivated to be happier when I admitted to myself that I was not as happy as I could be. I felt an emptiness and a longing for something. But what? I felt well-rooted spiritually, in my home life and in my career. But something was missing. A friend told me about a program that provides food to families in need and encouraged me to volunteer. I had doubts that volunteering would make me happier, but I had nothing to lose and jumped in.

To my surprise, collecting and distributing food to people with real needs was incredibly satisfying. The world's problems are big, but knowing I could do something small to help a few people was inspiring and empowering.

After a few months of volunteering, I actually felt more at ease and happier in my life. This feeling made me want to do more. I decided I would do something every day for someone in need. I was also inspired

to kick the commitment up a notch. I had found a Mother Teresa quote that rang true. "In this life we cannot do great things. But we can do small things with great love."

I felt as though I had been personally challenged. I set a goal to think differently. As I served, I would make a conscious effort to be more observant, more patient, more kind and to grow in love. I was curious to see where that would take me.

It turned out that making good on that two-part commitment had an almost magical effect. Day by day I felt more positive and energized. I also began to see and appreciate how fortunate I had been in my own life and, because of that, how much I had to give. I had never felt so grateful and content. This brand of volunteering—conscious, loving service to others—had replaced my longing with a deep sense of satisfaction.

As it turns out, science backs up the benefits of helping others. Studies by United Healthcare,¹ Carnegie Mellon University² and others have revealed that people who volunteer feel healthier.

They are less likely to develop high blood pressure, which often leads to a heart attack and stroke.

Even more dramatic is the connection between volunteering and emotional health and well-being. People who volunteer report less stress, improved mood and self-esteem, closer friendships and a feeling of belonging. They report a powerful sense of purpose, which in studies of the happiest people on earth, turns out to be key to happiness and as a bonus, to a longer life.³

At first, it was tough to make time to volunteer regularly, and growing in virtues like patience and kindness is a life-long practice, at least in my case. Change takes time and practice. But it is been worth the effort. If I will live longer remains to be seen, but on all other counts I can confirm the studies. My stress declined, my mood lifted and the wonderful people I met volunteering became life-long friends.

Not only did that nagging longing vanish, but this new path created the most fulfilling life I could have imagined—the stuff that real happiness is made of. And little did I know it then, but with this first step, I was well on my way to finding an abiding purpose in my life.

Not too long after my first foray into volunteering providing food to families in need, I ended up volunteering in villages in the Guatemalan highlands. It was in those remote villages that I found a joy like none I had experienced before. I also found my purpose.

I founded a help organization that is still going strong today, nearly three decades later.

In 2013, I was fortunate to be able to become a full-time volunteer in Guatemala. Now I have the honor of working with a wonderful team of volunteers to provide quality health care and education for young people with great need who live in those villages, and I am grateful for every day I have to serve.

But fulfillment does not depend on making volunteering a career. With every new day, each of us have the opportunity to do small things with great love for family, friends, and with a little effort, for strangers. If you find joy in walking a dog at a nearby shelter, volunteering at a thrift store, staffing a help project in a far-flung

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corner of the world as I do, or in some other form of loving service, the results will be life-changing for all involved.

If you are already volunteering, you know the benefits. Pass the idea on. If

not and you believe the studies and the stories like mine, a happier, more fulfilling life is just one resolution away—and it's not too late to do it in 2020.

If not now, when? ⬆

¹ <https://www.unitedhealthgroup.com/newsroom/2017/0914studydoinggoodisgoodforyou.html>

² https://www.cmu.edu/news/stories/archives/2013/june/june13_volunteeringhypertension.html

³ Shannon Freeman, John Garcia & Hannah R. Marston (2013) Centenarian Self-Perceptions of Factors Responsible for Attainment of Extended Health and Longevity, *Educational Gerontology*, 39:10, 717-728, DOI: 10.1080/03601277.2012.750981

Leslie Baer Dinkel has worked in critically underserved communities in Guatemala's highlands for nearly three decades. She is the founder of the non-profit organization LocalHope.org. Her new book, "Hope Dancing: Finding Purpose and a Place to Serve among the Maya," offers tremendous insight into poverty, the nature of self-determination and the transformational power of full-hearted giving.

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SheLift is a 501(c)3 organization that empowers young women with physical differences to discover confidence and self esteem through outdoor recreation and mentorship.

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Founded by Sarah Herron
(previous Bachelorette contestant)



One Love was founded in honor of Yeardeley Love, a 22-year-old college student who was killed by her ex-boyfriend. After her death, the family started the One Love Foundation to educate young people about the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships. For more information, visit joinonelove.org